

AESTHETIC CHARACTER OF SOME ASYMMETRICAL RHYTHMS:

An Analytic Study

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The aim of this essay is to bring out the aesthetic character of four 'seven-beat' cycles of Hindustani rhythm.

By 'aesthetic character' I understand what (or how) a thing appears to be when considered from the aesthetic point of view. What this point of view means is of course not easy to determine. The meaning varies as we turn from one art to another. Thus, whereas in the aesthetic consideration of a novel or play the question of lifelikeness is not generally left out¹, a similar notice of rhythm calls for no such question. Rhythm, as we employ it in India, is essentially non-representational. Its materials are mnemonic syllables in *laya*, not words with meaning. It does not describe or depict anything. Yet, in spite of the differences between the various arts, it seems safe to make the following generalization :

To regard an 'object' from the aesthetic point of view is to be intelligently — not necessarily analytically — aware of how it 'looks' *and* of its internal organization.

But I must explain what I have just said. The word 'object' here stands for whatever is attended to. It may be a (complete) work of art, or an individual item in, or a mere part of a music, dance or rhythmic recital, — say, the opening *that* of *Kathak* dance or, in the case of a solo *tabla* recital, the *theka* which is not itself a distinct item of playing², unlike *peshkar* and *tukras*.

'Looks' here means what (or how) the object *directly appears* to perception, not merely visual, but auditory. Thus, we may speak not only of the look

of a painting or sculpture, but of the nimble 'look' of a *drut tritala theka*. The 'look' of a poem, on the other hand, would mean its unity in so far as it is accessible to direct *imaginative* attention. And when I distinguish intelligent from analytic attention, I have in mind such situations as that of following the flow of a rhythm-cycle *with* a clear awareness of its 'khali,' 'bhari,' neatness, and general evenness, but *without* actively understanding *why* a particular 'bol' appears delightful at a particular place. Clear thinking is, however, not so removed from vivid perceiving as it is commonly thought to be; and this should be clearer to the reader when he has gone through the essay.

Finally, in suggesting that the aesthetic viewpoint means noticing not the mere look, but the inner organization of the work, I wish to keep away from such dubitable uses of the word 'aesthetic' as : 'the aesthetic delight of tasting a wine discriminately'. We can certainly distinguish one taste from other close ones, and also its own inner changes. But nobody speaks of perceiving how a taste is *organized*. I may add that the simple notice of how an 'object' of art is organized may come quite easily. Thus, any one who knows the elements of rhythm can 'see' the more shapely patterns as moving towards the *sama*, and so as highlighting its centrality.

The word *character* too calls for some comment. By 'aesthetic character', I here understand the organized and perceptual nature of the rhythm-cycle *as a whole*, not any such merely aspectual quality of it as the euphonic character of the *sama-bol* or the detail of this *bol's* being indicated (also) on 'the left one', as in the case of *roopak tala*.

Nor should we here ignore what the cycle appears to be *in the context of the total playing*. For, ordinarily, the *theka* provides a steady basis or background to whatever the drummer does; and just as the aesthetic character of the first *scene* is inseparable from what it does in the economy of the play it opens, a cycle too is not grasped in its full nature as an art-element unless it is viewed also as the matrix of the recital in which it figures. This aspect of the matter, however, I am constrained to leave out, just for the sake of brevity.

Let me now turn to determine the aesthetic character of a seven-beat cycle³ the *bols* of which are as follows :

1. (ox) ति॑न नृ॒स ति॑रक्कु॒ड़ि/धि॑न धि॒न/धा॒स धा॒स

What makes this cycle appear organized is the joint operation of many factors :

- (a) First, as in the case of any other *tals* of Hindustani music, the *sama* serves as the focal beat. From it we set out, and to it we return, completing a round or *avrti*; which makes the rhythm seem clearly *cyclic*, and in that sense organised.

(b) Then, there are the Gestalt principles of contrast, contiguity and similarity. Contrast is the most effective safeguard against monotony.⁴ It generates interest and prevents fatigue of attention. Contiguity and similarity make it easy for us to hold details as one. They make for unity. Here, in the case of the cycle in question, the opening *tin* — which is the *sama bol* — is a closed sound (mark the तिन); and it is followed forthwith by the open तिन ना. धिन धिन and धा धा are pairs of similars, though in relation to *each other* they show the same closed-open contrast that characterizes the opening तिन ना.

(c) The two *dhins*, if *played properly*, provide — by virtue of their elongated quality — some perceptible continuity to the cycle, and so make it appear organized.

(d) But, the most noteworthy detail is here the तिरकिट. It occurs at double the speed of any other *bol*. This makes it appear as a distinct figure against the setting of other *bols*. It is different from other *bols* not only in respect of its euphonic character, but (as already said) in that of its *laya*. This makes it a typical 'figure' of *rhythm*.

This particular excellence, I at once add, is not to be found in 'roopak' which too, as we know, is a 7-matra cycle :

2. ति॒न् ति॒न् ना॑/धि॒न् ना॑/धि॒न् ना॑

The operation of the principles of similarity, contiguity and contrast is here easy to trace. But no single syllable in this cycle can be regarded as a 'figure' *against* the occurrent context of other *bols*.

In the case of 'pashto' :

3. ति॒न् त॒क्/धि॒न्त्/धा॑ धा॑

the *sama-bol* तिन indeed occurs only once — as in the case of the first cycle chosen. But the other *bols* are here few (as compared to the filling of the first theka); if played at *madya laya*, 'pashto' therefore seems internally sparse, this being one reason why it calls for, and is played *at quick speed*; and the canvas of the theka, if I may say so, is not unified and extensive enough to heighten, by contrast, the तिन as a figure against ground.

Mughlai, another septimal cycle, has a greater filling (than 'pashto') of syllables :

4. क॒ड तौ॑ ति॒रकिट्/धि॒न्त्/धा॑ ति॒रकिट्

And, the *sama-bol* कत too occurs only once. What is more, the धिन is here to be played (or recited) in such a manner that, by its very breathing quality (called सांस), it may provide a clear measure of continuity to the total playing. But, at the same time, *mughlai* has two features which, I believe, make it on the whole inferior to the first cycle from the viewpoint of the ideal aesthetic character of rhythm as a *theka*:

First, the ता occurs *between* the second and the third beats with such delightful subtlety that it seems a very close rival to the *sama* — तिन, thereby bedimming the requisite centrality of the focal beat. Besides, this ता comes *so soon* after the 'sama' which is the point of self-steadying and beginning a new round, that it seems to *take off*. The *Khali* of (a kind of) *sawari tala*, on the other hand, appears only to fall or *come* between the 8th and 9th *matras*,⁵ because the $8\frac{1}{2}$ th beat is obviously quite a long way off from the 'sama'. And, secondly, the two *tirkits* here, along with the feature just referred to, invest the cycle (as played) with a measure of impetuosity that seems inconsistent with the steadiness demanded by a 'madhya laya' *theka*.⁶ It is certainly quite enjoyable to the knowledgeable; but this is not the same thing as saying that its aesthetic character as a *theka* is impeccable.

I conclude, therefore, that if — as I believe, it is only proper to suggest — the aesthetic character of a *theka* be taken to mean *perceptible organized quality, an interestingness accessible to those who can discriminate the accents, and a measure of steadiness*, the first cycle is superior to the other asymmetrical rhythms I have referred to.

I must make three more remarks before closing this brief essay :

First, the 'form' of a rhythm-cycle is not mere articulateness, but its skilfully accentuated quality. Articulation is the future of being *composed* of recognizably *distinct* sounds. It means, as Mrs. Langer says, that the structure of an art-object is given to perception, in opposition to the unity of mere mixing, as is typified by a mixture containing many medicines without at all revealing them. But, and this is important, in the case of good rhythmic work the clarity of the syllables is substantially the result of the drummer's own active regulation of their intensity — so that some appear more vigorous than the others — partly through such ways of 'pressing' the drums as are called दाक-गांस.

Secondly, because of this very norm, the excessively quick playing of a *theka* is aesthetically condemnable, because then its accents tend to get blurred.

And finally, no appeal to the laws of perception can *exhaust* what a cycle *can appear as played*. The drummer's own skill can always bring in something new. Thus, in the case of the first cycle, by making the second

dhin a little longer than it is — and by making the following (penultimate) *dha*-occur a little later than its grammatically set moment — the player can impart an extra sharpness to the advent of the *sama-tin*.⁷ Such variations are perhaps essential to save the drummer himself — who has to play the *theka* repeatedly, and on many different occasions — from the long term mutation of a mechanized auditory habit, and from its concomitant boredom.

NOTES

1. F.J. Coleman : *Contemporary Studies in Aesthetics*. McGraw Hill Book Co., 1968 (PB), Introduction, P. 11.
2. Though drummers often seek to tempt listeners' attention to a sustained 'drut' playing of the *theka alone*.
3. I owe the knowledge of all the cycles cited in this essay to Ustad Chhamma Khan, a drummer in the Music Faculty of Delhi University. For their notation I am indebted to Prof. Sudhir Kumar Saxena who teaches *tabla* at the Music College of Baroda University.
4. S.C. Pepper's article *Aesthetic Design* in Introductory Readings in Aesthetics, edited by John Hospers, The Free Press, 1969, p. 69.
5. The bols of this kind of *sawari* — cycle are as follows :

१ २ ३ धागे तिरकिट/धिन् ४ ५ ६ ७ धातिरकिट/तिनः

९ १० ११ १२ १३ १४ १५
तो तिरकिट धागे तिरकिट/धिनकधा तिरकिट

6. Even in common parlance, we may note, this word implies, stability.
7. This detail, as also all the rhythm —cycles mentioned in this essay except No. 3 (*pashto*) were recorded by the Sangit Natak Akademi (New Delhi) when I presented my paper, 'Sama in Hindustani Rhythm': A psychoesthetic study', to their Poona Seminar on the psychology of music, on 12.1.75. But the detail in question was there illustrated in terms of recitation or पढ़त, not played on the drums.